

## T&FN Interview

# DICK BUEKLE

by Jon Hendershott

**T**here most certainly is an element of "rags-to-riches" in Dick Buerkle's emergence as the fastest miler in indoor history. And added are elements of dogged persistence and unpredictability. Throw in a large measure of self-examination and evaluation. Spice, of course, with talent—such talent that maybe even Dick Buerkle never knew he had. Simmer such a brew over the slow, but undimming flame of never being satisfied, of always believing he could reach just a bit farther.

Oh sure, Buerkle (pronounced "Berk-lee") was a good runner—but he was a 5000 man, right? He was the 4:28 miler who was a walk-on at Villanova, the guy who didn't get a scholarship until he was a junior (1969).

After college he went the route of "settling down" as a Spanish teacher in Rochester, N.Y. But not for long, as he knew he could do so much more in running. So he came back in '72 to place 2nd in the AAU 5000 and, even though he placed 8th in the Olympic Trials, he still wasn't satisfied.

Suddenly in '73, though, things started coming together—Buerkle ran 12:59.8 for 3M, 13:32.8 for 5000, placed 2nd in the AAU and made his first international team. The next year, the totally-bald Buerkle (from a childhood fever) arrived worldwide, eventually ranking 4th globally, winning the AAU, and setting his PR of 13:23.4. By the Olympic year, he had won the AAU again and the Olympic Trials. He was an Olympian.

Despite running 13:29.1 in his Montreal heat, Buerkle didn't make the final, but he still ranked No. 1 in the U.S. Then, unexpectedly, no Dick Buerkle in 1977. At 30 (9/3/47), he had other things to attend to in his life and running could wait a year.

The still-simmering brew reached the boiling point this winter, first at the Ali meet with a 3:40.0 1500 and then with a shocking 3:54.9 world record at CYO. And it was a "new" Dick Buerkle who ran those races—"new" in mind, "new" in knowledge and "new" in his strength of purpose, to be able to run from the front and the outcome be damned.

So the 4:28 walk-on had developed into the 3:54.9 recordman. Suddenly he was Dick Buerkle, the miler. The entire emergence of Buerkle, as a record-setting runner and as a growing, mature person, has become a continual source of amazement, revelation and challenge—to Dick Buerkle most of all.

**T&FN:** Some people have described

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you as taciturn, pretty closemouthed. On the other side, Don Kardong for one calls you the funniest person he knows. How would you describe the "real" Dick Buerkle?

**Buerkle:** Oh jeez, I don't know. I'm just getting to know him a little.

**T&FN:** After the CYO record, you made some comments about image. How would you say the image of Dick Buerkle has changed since your last competitive year in '76?

**Buerkle:** I always had an image of myself as a successful person, but things have happened which haven't allowed me to do all the things I really wanted to do.

I came from a big family and there weren't a lot of bucks to spend. Money is a pretty big thing in college, but I was pretty much busted. I had to be concerned not only with my running, but also my studies and having enough money to get a bowl of ice cream once in a while.

I went to college where some people had a lot of money and that may have delayed the success I have had. But I always had the feeling that I would do well someday, in whatever I tried.

Even not having a scholarship until I was a junior is tied into the whole image thing. The scholarship is a kind of club. You feel somewhat elite when you have a scholarship, and a bit like an outsider when you don't. But when you beat enough scholarship guys you don't really feel that way anymore and you know you are just as good as they are.

**T&FN:** Has this image changed since '74, which was also such a good year for you?

**Buerkle:** In '74, I thought of myself as a winner, but I didn't know what to do with it yet. I won some big races and still didn't know what that meant to me. I still didn't know why I was winning the big races. Now I have a much clearer picture of what I want to do. . .

**T&FN:** Do you want to say what that is?

**Buerkle:** Well, now that I say that, I guess it really may not be true. This is kind

of a scary time for me. I feel I can do. . . anything I want? Maybe that's too strong. I feel I can accomplish some pretty important things. I have to decide what I want to do. It's kind of a plotting time for me right now, when I can think about what's the most important thing I can do and what I really want to do.

**T&FN:** When did you first see yourself as a miler?

**Buerkle:** Well, in '74 I ran 3:57.8 the day after I ran 13:23.4 for 5000 and I said to myself, "Buerkle, sooner or later, you've got to try that mile." Here I had run my best 5000 the day before, I was physically and mentally drained but I still ran 3:57.8. So I knew there was a lot more in there than that.

I was tired after '74; that year took a lot out of me. I ran a lot of big races, which I wasn't used to doing, and I ran well in all of them.

When I came back, I didn't want to run anymore. I was bored, but I felt pressure to keep on running because '76 was right around the corner. I didn't know as much about myself as I do now.

In '75, I told myself I had to concentrate on the 5000 because that's where I would make the Olympic team. I went to China and came home tired, but I still had to keep on running. Then I made the team in '76 and was pretty much No. 1 in the country in the 5000, so it would have been suicide to try anything else.

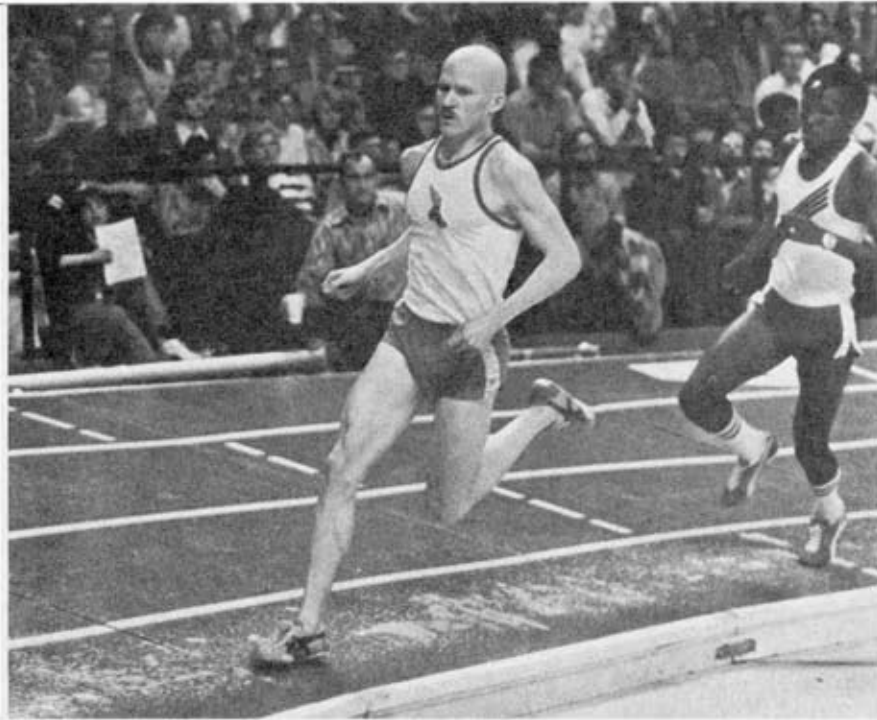
After '76, though, I took a year off, but I decided long before I came back that I was going to have some fun. I was going to try the mile. I guess that after I ran that 3:57.8 in '74, I knew that someday I would run a quick mile.

**T&FN:** Why did you take '77 off? Because '76 was such a drain?

**Buerkle:** Well, the press came out saying I had quit track. I never quit. I still ran every day. I just took a year off on purpose because I wanted a year off. Kip Keino said he used to take Sundays off. I knew I needed some time off.

I wanted some time to do some writing [he wrote for the Sunday magazine

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*"I just had the feeling I could break the world record."  
Buerkle en route to 3:54.9, Jan. 13, 1978.*

of a local newspaper besides dabbling in poetry], to change jobs [he is now a salesman for Bausch & Lomb, the contact lens firm, and lives in Buffalo], my wife was going to have a baby and I wanted to be around for that. I just wanted some time.

Plus I knew the itch would come. Every time I tried to really quit, I got an itch to compete again. I did this time. I got the itch and here I go again.

**T&FN:** Now that you're back, do you really consider yourself a miler, or are you just a 5000 guy who is experimenting around in a different event?

**Buerkle:** I'm just open-minded right now. I wouldn't want to say right now because I'm really not sure. I still have some exploring to do. I've run only five races of the 1000, 1500 or mile and that's not enough to tell yet. What I've done is encouraging, but it's not enough to tell what the bottom line is yet.

**T&FN:** You once said that not having hair since you were 12 probably limited you all your life. Is that involved with those self-imposed barriers a person places on himself?

**Buerkle:** Everybody has some excuse why they can't be great—"Hell, I'm from South Dakota and nobody from there ever did this before" or "I'm from New York City and only people from outside the city really make it." Those kinds of things, which are just excuses for yourself for failing. But then too, there haven't been many bald peanut-butter freaks to break 4:00 in the mile.

*Bible of the Sport*

**T&FN:** Have there been other barriers you have broken down, or is it just an overall way of thinking?

**Buerkle:** Well, I feel I think a lot about things and it has taken me a while to get my theories together and really determine how I feel about things.

Most things in life are very similar to each other. The same type of concentration is needed for each different type of speciality in life. I decided I wanted to make some more money so I went into sales. Then I learned that most things which are similar are just clothed a bit differently.

**T&FN:** You were quoted once lately as having decided losing wasn't that important. Is it?

**Buerkle:** Sure, it matters that I lose. I don't like to lose. I believe what I said was that it won't blow my mind if I lose. I think I'm relaxed enough to know that you can't be afraid of losing. If you're afraid of losing, you're never going to take any chances. If you don't take chances, you'll never have any fun in life.

**T&FN:** Have you ever considered how being at Villanova—with Marty Liquori, Dave Patrick, Frank Murphy, Chris Mason, all sub-4 guys in the glamor event—affected your estimations of your own capabilities, not only in the mile, but in general?

**Buerkle:** Hmmm, well, I learned a lot from them. I learned a lot about selling from Jumbo Elliott. Jumbo is a very confident person. We stayed in the best hotels everywhere we went, we ate good food and we just lived well. Jumbo believed

in that, and that taught me to think highly of yourself. If you want to achieve, you have to think highly of yourself as a person.

I saw all of those runners grow in confidence. In a way, it's like Harvard. The thing is, Harvard isn't great because all the teachers there are so good—and they will probably get mad about this. The thing that makes Harvard so great is that it gets the best kids. If a school has the best kids, they will push the hell out of each other and be extremely competitive in school and some great minds will result.

Same for runners. When you get all the best people at a school, like Villanova or Oregon, you're going to develop some good runners. Then if you have a coach like Jumbo, you're going to develop some really great runners.

**T&FN:** But did you ever have any doubts about your talent because they were the ones who were achieving?

**Buerkle:** Probably consciously I did. But subconsciously I didn't because I couldn't quit running. If I had been able to quit, then I would have been admitting to myself that what I had done up to then was enough.

But I couldn't quit. There was something deep inside saying I couldn't quit and that thing inside me kept echoing and saying I could do so much better. I knew that someday I would be good—in something.

**T&FN:** You said that making the '76 Olympic team shattered your image of yourself. How?

**Buerkle:** You don't know about yourself. You work at something, but you don't know if you're going to be successful. Then all of a sudden you are and, holy crow... you don't know what to do. Making the team was a life-long goal for me and I got my goal. That just said to me, "Hey, you did it. You're successful." That's a big thing, to work for 8 or 10 years and then achieve a goal. Some people work for 30 years and never realize their goals.

**T&FN:** You have also commented on doing things for yourself, versus doing things because you thought others wanted you to.

**Buerkle:** There came a point where I wasn't going to seek the approval of other people. I was a big approval-seeker. I wanted people to say, "Gee, Dick Buerkle is really a great guy." After a while I realized that while people might think that, I wasn't doing what I wanted to do. So I told myself that I was going to do what I wanted to do. If people think I'm nice, that's fine. If they don't, that's fine, too.

So I started making some admissions to myself—"Hell, yes, I want to go to the West coast and run. I want to move to Florida. I want to go to Europe. I want to be an Olympian." Once you set a goal, you determine the things that will help you achieve that goal.

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**T&FN:** How would you say all this personal examination and evaluation has affected your running?

**Buerkle:** It hasn't hurt it. I wanted to run a fast time in the mile and I wasn't concerned about how I did it. I wanted to go out there and do it. I was taking a chance. There was a chance I wouldn't finish the race, but that wasn't important to me. I wanted to see how fast I could run and the only way to do that was to do something different.

**T&FN:** You're referring to the CYO race?

**Buerkle:** No, the Ali race. I told myself I was going to take it out and see what happened. I did and when I saw what happened I realized that if I had had a little more spark at the end, I could have won that race. So I went out at CYO the next week and did that.

**T&FN:** How did you feel about the 3:40.0 at Ali?

**Buerkle:** I was elated. I got 3rd but I was really happy because I had done what I wanted. I wasn't concerned if I ended up looking bad. I wanted to make some people hurt and even if they beat me, they could look back and say they had a race.

Waigwa was working when he went by me. He went flying by me and when a guy does that it should tell you he's scared. He's thinking, "I'd better get by this guy and crush him because I don't know how much longer I can hang on." When a guy eases by you and then puts on a bit of a spurt, you know he's kicking your tail.

**T&FN:** So what were your thoughts going into the CYO meet?

**Buerkle:** I wanted to break the world record. It was a good track and I knew I was ready. The timing was perfect.

I just had the feeling I could break the world record. I was running well, it was in the back of my head, so what the hell. Why not try it? Even if I didn't, at least I tried.

**T&FN:** Plus you didn't care what people thought of you?

**Buerkle:** I admit though that after that first quarter [57.2] I was a little worried. I thought, "What are you doing out here in front of all these people? You're going to make an ass of yourself." Jumbo was there and people I knew were there. So there was still some of that.

The pace slowed down in the second quarter and I thought I couldn't get the record. But it didn't slow too much and I kept grinding away and suddenly we were in the last quarter. I was really pleased with my last quarter [56.6].

**T&FN:** And what were your thoughts when you crossed the line?

**Buerkle:** Oh, God, I wish I had a tape of it. I never jumped around so much in my life. I just went bananas. I thought, "Here it is. You said you were going to do it, you tried and you did it. It's fantastic."

**T&FN:** What do you think is your potential in the mile?

**Buerkle:** That's a good question. I'm plotting that and trying to think about how

fast I can run. I really don't know, except much faster than I have.

**T&FN:** You didn't go to San Diego because of a stress fracture?

**Buerkle:** Well, it isn't a stress fracture, but the doctors are still determining exactly what it is. My left foot started bothering me just after Millrose. I can't get up on my toes to sprint. Boy, I was really looking forward to running on the big track out there. I know the record would have gone.

**T&FN:** You're a realist, so you know there is a world of difference between running well indoors and doing the same outdoors. What are your goals for the coming year?

**Buerkle:** I want to run some exciting races in Europe. I like it over there. I want

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## "People like it when you let them see your soul."

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to run well in the Ben Franklin mile at the Penn Relays. I'm looking forward to running the 5000, too, but it will be only when I really feel like running it.

**T&FN:** Do you feel 13:12 is within your potential in the 5000?

**Buerkle:** Well does Dick Quax think 13:12 is within his potential? Or does Marty Liquori? Or Dick Buerkle?

**T&FN:** Or 13 minutes?

**Buerkle** [laughs heartily]: Indeed. Hey, what did the guy in the book *The Front Runner* run? Billy what'shisname? He ran 13:07 I think.

**T&FN:** I know, and it just killed him, right?

**Buerkle:** Yup, right at the line. What a way to go.

**T&FN:** Well, you...

**Buerkle:** He finished dead first.

**T&FN:** Arrgh, Kardong was right! Anyway, you said after CYO that pressure brings a sense of freedom. Can you explain?

**Buerkle:** When you are under pressure, that pressure will eventually come off. Either you will take it off or it will fall off. So you are extremely free and you may as well do something rash and free and wild and crazy.

There is a neat passage from *Alice In Wonderland*. Alice asked, "Which road do I take?" I think it was the Cheshire Cat who replied, "Where do you want to go?" She said she didn't know and he said, "Then it

doesn't matter."

The thing is, by doing something that is wild or crazy, you can make a race so competitive. And people love that. There's nothing that turns people on more than honest-to-goodness competition. People like it when you let them see your soul.

Entertaining is such an important part of track. If people aren't entertained, they won't go to meets. If they don't go to meets, then I don't want to be at a meet. I want people to enjoy going to meets, because I enjoy going to meets. I want them to enjoy the races they see, and I want to make my races enjoyable for them.

If people respond, the athletes will respond. Jeez, at Millrose I was going nuts. When the Wanamaker mile was announced, I jumped up in the air. I could feel that people were excited and keyed for the race and that excited me.

**T&FN:** Do you have any idea how long your career may last now that it's at this new, higher level?

**Buerkle:** Well, I'm going to take it one step at a time. I don't want to quit. I watch a guy like Muhammad Ali and can't help but think that I hope I get out, though, before I get indifferent. Or if I get indifferent then hopefully I will know when to take time off again. But as long as I'm running well on a world-class level, I'd like to keep running until... who knows, I'm 50?

**T&FN:** Just keep your job to keep you in peanut butter, eh?

**Buerkle:** Hey, it was super. After CYO, Skippy sent me a case of peanut butter. And I got some posters from the peanut growers association in Georgia.

**T&FN:** How has Dick Buerkle's running, and the changes taking place in it, affected the growth of Dick Buerkle, the person?

**Buerkle:** When you get a lot of attention you also get more opportunities. That leads to decisions that have to be made. My family has gone without things for a long time and I want to make decisions that will allow us to live comfortably and will allow me to keep on running.

Also, I enjoy the people I am meeting, people in television and journalism and just all over. That's really a personal high for me. It's enjoyable to talk to people. It's support and it makes it all easier. It's easier to train and run when people react to what you have done. If there is no one supporting you, it's very tough. So if that's what the easy life is like, I would like life to be easy like that.

**T&FN:** How has your personal growth affected your running?

**Buerkle:** It has knocked down some of the barriers that I thought existed, but which weren't really barriers at all. It has taught me that the limits on me are put there mostly by myself and so I should reevaluate those limits. Just try to see if they are realistic limits, or if they are like puffs of air. □